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ABSTRACT

Intended for administrators and policymakers as well as teachers, this digest explores the nature of vocabulary and its implications for classroom instruction. After defining vocabulary and discussing some of the sources of English vocabulary, the digest examines how children's vocabularies develop. It then discusses the role of vocabulary instruction and ways that such instruction can go beyond teaching just new words to enhance students' understanding of how words are used. (HTH)

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ERIC Digest

Vocabulary

Richard E. Hodges

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean...."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master--that's all." (Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass, 1872)

The nature and origins of words have long held a fascination for interested scholars and lay public, not only to satisfy intellectual curiosities, but also because word knowledge has particular importance in literate societies. For the same reasons, scholarly interests have turned toward determining the nature of vocabulary development--that is, how and to what extent speakers and writers of English become, like Humpty Dumpty, masters of our lexical stock.

The outcomes of these investigations are of more than passing interest to educators; for word knowledge contributes significantly to achievement in the subjects of the school curriculum, as well as in formal and informal speaking and writing. In fact, a substantial body of research has been published in this century concerning the educational implications of these vocabulary studies (Dale and Razik, 1963). The purpose of this digest, then, is to summarize briefly how these interests are expressed in current literature and to suggest some sources available for further reading.

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DEFINITION OF VOCABULARY

The vocabulary, or lexicon, of a language encompasses the stock of words of that language which is at the disposal of a speaker or writer. Contained within this lexical storehouse is a core vocabulary of the words used to name common and fundamental concepts and situations of a culture, as well as subsets of words that result from one's personal, social, and occupational experiences. Probably the most important influence on one's speech is the simple circumstance of the language spoken in the country of one's birth. Each of us grows up interacting with and interpreting the world around us, to a large degree through the medium of language.

SOURCES OF ENGLISH VOCABULARY

Languages are as vibrant and dynamic as the cultures of which they are a part, and the lexical stock of a language is a vivid example of this linguistic principle. Words are, after all, no more than labels for concepts about the world around us and, as new concepts emerge or old ones change, the lexical stock changes accordingly. It is a linguistic paradox that change is a constant when applied to vocabulary. Many words in common use 200 years ago are now obsolete, just as many words in use today will be tomorrow's artifacts.

The English language is no exception, with a lexicon that reflects its many sources of origin and the effects of change over time. Besides the core stock of words rooted in Anglo-Saxon beginnings, English contains additional thousands of words borrowed from language communities with whom we have come in contact. Both of these sources provide additional thousands of words that have been derived from earlier word forms to which prefixes and suffixes have been added or that have been shifted to new grammatical functions. Still more words have emerged by the process of compounding in which existing words are joined to form new combining parts of words, or simply by creating new words out of "whole cloth." The ingredients of our lexical stock are indeed rich and varied (See Bolton, 1982; Francis, 1965; Laird, 1981. Pyles, 1971; Shipley, 1977).

VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

We do not learn most of our words by looking them up in a dictionary. Rather, we learn them in the context of our experiences with listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Many studies have been undertaken to determine the nature and extent of children's vocabulary development (Petty and others, 1968). These studies demonstrate the truly prodigious linguistic accomplishments that children attain by the time they reach school age. While estimates vary, by age six most children have active vocabularies numbering in the several thousands of words (deVilliers, 1978).

There is, however, an important difference between knowing words and understanding their broad range of uses and referents. For vocabulary development is first and foremost a matter of concept development. For this reason considerable attention has been turned in recent years to children's semantic development; that is, to the development of word meaning. (See Anglin, 1970; deVilliers, 1978; Foss and Hakes, 1978). These studies illustrate that how words are used, not their length or frequency of use, indicates children's lexical maturity and, commonly, their intellectual maturity as well (Straw, 1981; p. 185).

VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

Vocabulary development is, of course, a lifetime undertaking in which schools play a critical role in enriching and extending the young child's basic lexical repertoire, particularly through the medium of written language. Yet, "it is not the enlargement of vocabulary itself that is of value but the enlargement of the mind to new ideas" (Petty and others, 1968). For this reason, vocabulary instruction properly belongs in all subjects of the curriculum in which students meet both new ideas and the words by which they are represented in the language.

The opportunities for vocabulary instruction are especially

pronounced, however, in language arts and reading where words themselves can be an appropriate focus of study. Bearing in mind the dictum that knowledge of word meaning is the ultimate objective of study, teachers can provide numerous opportunities for students to explore the origins and forms of words as a means of extending and enriching their word knowledge. (See Dale and O'Rourke, 1971; Hodges, 1982; Johnson and Pearson, 1984.)

Teachers can also use students' personal experiences and prior knowledge to develop vocabulary in the classroom. Through informal activities such as semantic association students brainstorm a list of words associated with a familiar word, pooling their knowledge of pertinent vocabulary as they discuss the less familiar words on the list. Semantic mapping goes a step further, grouping the words on the list into categories and arranging them on the visual "map" so that relationships among the words become clearer. In semantic feature analysis words are grouped according to certain features, usually with the aid of a chart that graphically depicts similarities and differences among features of different words. Finally, analogies are a useful way of encouraging thoughtful discussion about relationships among meanings of words (see Johnson and Pearson, 1984, pp. 33-50, for illustrations of these activities.)

The linguist W. N. Francis once commented that "many people...go through life with a vocabulary adequate only to their daily needs...but never indulging in curiosity and speculation about words. Others are wordlovers--collectors and connoisseurs....But even those who aspire no further than to the writing of good clear expository prose must become at least amateur connoisseurs of words. Only this way--not by formal exercises or courses in vocabulary building--will they learn to make the best possible use of the vast and remarkable lexicon of English" (Francis, 1965; pp. 164-65).

The success or failure of schooling to foster word knowledge is in large part dependent upon teacher attitude toward vocabulary. Thus, in the final analysis, teachers who are "wordlovers" themselves provide students

both with a potent example of the value and pleasure that can be derived from exploring the richness and diversity of the English lexicon, and with classroom contexts for such exploration by drawing on students' shared experiences. Students may thus learn that language learning is a lifelong venture, one in which written language plays a particularly important role. Every contact with written language affords not only an opportunity to learn more about the writing system we use--its structure and how words are spelled--but also about the meanings and uses of words themselves.

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